

Faith Based Advocacy Council Hosts Speakers Combating “Islamophobia”

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Islamophobia entered common English usage in 1997 with the publication of a report by the Runnymede Trust condemning negative emotions such as fear, hatred, and dread directed at Islam or Muslims. As the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1997 to 2006, Kofi Annan recognized the growing bigotry toward Muslims, Annan took the term “Islamophobia” and made it known to the world.

As part of the ongoing Faith-Based Advocacy Council (FBAC) hosted by the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH), the meeting on March 3, 2016, featured leaders from our local Muslim community to speak about Muslims and mental health.



Sherman Jackson, USC Professor and Executive Director for Islamic Thought, Culture and Practice, spoke first to the multiple faith leaders and LACDMH staff present, outlining the history of Islam in the United States. He divided Islam in America into three distinct periods. The first period, from the time of slavery to World War I, brought African slaves into the states, 12-20% of whom were Muslim. The second, from WWI to 1965, saw the home-grown increase in Islam, known as “Proto Islamic” movements, predominantly among African Americans, and was considered a working class

phenomenon. Jackson calls this period of growth in the Black community a “Communal Conversation” because there was no perceived inconsistency between being Black and being Muslim. The third period, from 1965 to the present, allowed the growth of Muslim communities due to greater immigration of Eastern and Asian Muslims into the U.S., the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War. Sherman noted that today most Muslim Americans find themselves apologizing to others for the perceived stereotype of all Muslims being terrorists.



The second speaker, Edina Lekovic, Community Leader and Communication Strategist, stated that the backlash against the Muslim community in American has reached the mainstream, as we can see in the current political cycle, with politicians asking to ban all Muslims from entering the U.S. The backlash is based on fear and ignorance.

“In order to combat the bigotry of Islam, we need to expose others to it in a safe, controlled environment. Get to know and really see a Muslim,” she said. Because of the mass shootings in San Bernardino and in Paris, “hate crimes” against Muslims have risen. But, Lekovic says, we can use these events as an “Crisistunity,” turning crisis into opportunity by educating the public on what Islam really is.

As in the case of battling stigmas associated with persons having a diagnosis of mental illness, we need to combat the stigma of the notion of all Muslims being dangerous by learning more about them. For additional info on how to get informed on American Muslims and combating “Islamophobia,” see <http://www.islamophobia.org/> and/or <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/islamophobia/>.

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